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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: OBASANJO COOL TO PARIS SUMMIT ON
COTE D'IVOIRE

REF: STATE 256597

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F.JETER. REASON 1.5
(B) and (D).

1. (C) I spoke at length by phone on Saturday evening with President Obasanjo on the French proposal to hold a summit on Cote d'Ivoire. Obasanjo is opposed and I think adamantly so, to the French proposal. He said that, if invited, he would not attend. "They can hold the summit, but I am not going; Nigeria will not be represented," he bluntly declared. Cote d'Ivoire, he contended, is an African problem that must be solved by African leaders.

2. (C) Anticipating my question, a more statesmanlike Obasanjo expressed gratitude to France (and the U.S.) for helping to broker a meeting with Cameroonian President Biya. However, Obasanjo added that he had told Biya at their meeting in Geneva that he would not meet again outside of the African continent, or for that matter, outside of Cameroon or Nigeria.

3. (C) I explained the French were not trying to overshadow ECOWAS peacemaking efforts, but rather they conceived the summit as a logical extension of the Lome peace process and as a way to inject it with needed momentum. Obasanjo, however, would have none of it. Instead, he inferred the French proposal was Wade's idea because Wade was unhappy with Eyadema. The French need to support the Lome process, not displace it, he stressed. Obasanjo said would he raise this objection with Wade when they meet on December 16.

4. (C) Obasanjo said a number of regional leaders had called him to ask that he engage on Cote d'Ivoire. The Ivorian Prime Minister had also visited Abuja to ask that he intercede. Obasanjo said he had agreed, and that first he was going to Kara to try to heal the rift between Wade and Edayema. Wade and Kufuor would join him there. Eyadema, he said, felt very badly about the distance that had developed between himself and Wade. From Kara, Obasanjo said he and the three other leaders would go to Cote d'Ivoire to meet Gbagbo. They would tell Gbagbo that ending the rebellion would necessitate political compromise because the essential problems were political not military. The region would help if he wanted it; if not, the region would stand aside. Obasanjo emphasized, however, that if Gbagbo refused this offer of assistance, Gbagbo himself would lose.

5. (C) I told the President that my impression was the real leaders of the rebellion were not those who were negotiating in Lome. Obasanjo agreed. He recounted telling Eyadema he was wasting his time negotiating with "sergeants" in Lome; instead, he would have to "go behind the masks" and find out who the real leaders might be, but agreed that Ouattara, Bedie, and Guei's successor all needed to be at the table.

6. (C) As our conversation ended, I told Obasanjo that we recognized the domestic imperatives he faces, but his engagement on Cote d'Ivoire could be instrumental. Obasanjo said Nigeria is willing to engage and is even willing to send troops "under the right conditions." However, Nigeria would only engage if asked; even then, it would want to avoid the perception of being the region's primary policeman.

17. (C) Obasanjo promised to brief me on his return to Abuja.

18. (C) Comment: The timing of the French initiative is unfortunate from the Nigerian perspective. The idea comes just as the Nigerians are revving up to assume a more active role in the mediation process. In the back of his mind, Obasanjo probably feels the Paris summit was intended, at least in part, to limit Nigeria's role and to underscore that France not Nigeria or even ECOWAS remains the main underwriter of security in Francophone West Africa. Second, despite Obasanjo's "gratefulness" to the French for brokering the meeting with Biya, Paris is not the GON's favorite foreign capital at the moment. Obasanjo still smarts from the ICJ decision on Bakassi that many Nigerians believe the French played an unhelpful role in crafting. He clearly does not want to be seen as legitimizing the French by returning to the scene of the notorious September 5 meeting where he is reported to have agreed to implement the ICJ ruling (the GON denies he made the commitment). Right now, a trip to Paris might not play well with the Nigerian public.
JETER